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American Journal

San Antonio Hotel Makes Its Move

By Paul Taylor
Washington Post Staff Writer

SAN ANTONIO, March 31—Moments before 11 a.m. today, the Fairmount Hotel reached the intersection of Bowie and Commerce streets, needing to hang a right.

The three-story, 3.2 million-pound, 79-year-old brick hotel, believed to be the heaviest building ever transported on wheels, took its time turning the corner.

But with several thousand festive on-lookers cheering every centimeter of progress (some wearing T-shirts proclaiming, "I shared in a moving experience"), the historic Italianate Victorian structure completed the turn—and with it, one of the trickiest parts of its six-block trek through the heart of San Antonio's tourist district—in a solid, on-schedule four hours.

"I need to get to a telephone so I can call a bookie," said Terry Emmert, president of Emmert International Inc., a specialty moving company from Clackamas, Ore., hired to handle the \$1 million moving project. "I heard yesterday that odds at Caesars Palace [against] us making it were 5 to 1," he said. "Today they're 7 to 3, and dropping fast."

Emmert, who has moved everything from offshore oil rigs to railroad depots, never had mounted an operation requiring so much coordination with others.

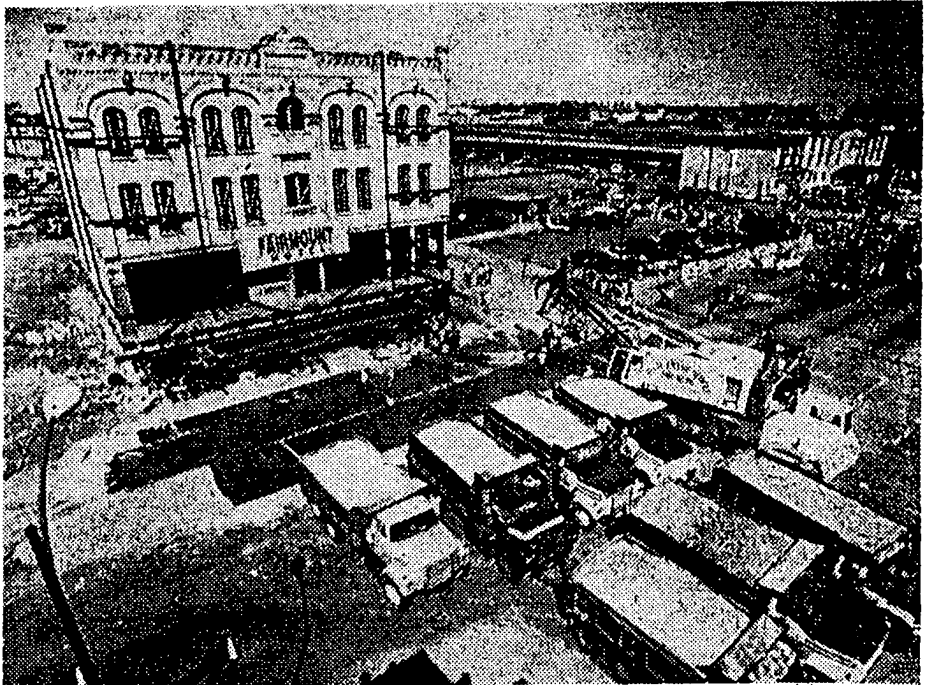
"We had one meeting with people from 16 different city agencies: police, traffic engineers, sewer, fire, electric, water, you name it," said project manager Rusty Gorman. "You wouldn't believe [what is] in a city street: light poles, traffic signals, waste containers, newspaper boxes. . . . Basically, they had to tear everything down in front of us, and then reconstruct it all as soon as we moved past."

Coordination has been the key. The hotel's route passes in front of the city's convention center and within a few feet of the Marriott and Hilton hotels, both booked for the week.

"We got 2,000 people arriving for a petrochemical convention today," convention center manager Joe Madison said, "and so far, there's been no problem." It's too early to call the move a success—it won't be completed until Tuesday evening—but so far it has gone smoothly.

"The only risky part was lifting it off its foundation," said Gorman, 30, who has been in the moving business three years. "Everything else is icing on the cake. There may be some sweaty palms in San Antonio, but it's really been a breeze."

Emmert's secret, if you can call it that,



ASSOCIATED PRESS

The 79-year-old Fairmount Hotel being hauled to its new location six blocks away.

wheels normally used in mines. The lifts are automatically adjusted to keep the building level at all times (even when, during the right turn, one of the dollies rode up over the curb); each of the 20-ply rubber tires, which support the weight, is 15 inches wide and costs \$800. There are 288 of them on the project.

"We have the Cadillac of dollies, and our dollies have the Cadillac of wheels," said Emmert, 40, who started the moving company in 1968.

Emmert placed three tiers of steel I-beams under the building at its old site, and then, two weeks ago, started jacking it up a total of eight feet, using the dollies' hydraulic jacks.

"We haven't lost a brick," Gorman said. "All the cracks you see in the building were in it when we got here."

The hotel, built in 1906, was a rather plain "salesman hotel" that catered to a working-class trade. It remained in use until 1968, when a nearby department store purchased it and let it stand empty. The rear 10 feet of the 65-by-84-foot building have sustained heavy water damage in the past 17 years.

The building would have been demolished to make way for a new office development but for the intervention of the San Antonio Conservation Society, which struggled for five years to save it.

"We're not just a bunch of little old ladies in tennis sneakers," said Pat Osborne, city preservation officer. "Senti-

The new site is a city-owned tract near La Villita, the restored shopping district at the end of San Antonio's famed Riverwalk. The city expects to earn \$1 million in lease fees over the next 20 years.

The hotel developer is looking at a potential bonanza, too. He cheerfully acknowledges that it would have been less expensive to build a new brick shell, or even to dismantle the old building and reconstruct it, brick by brick. But neither approach would have given him what he needed to make the project work: a federal tax break for historic preservation.

"You might say I'm moving a tax break six blocks," said co-owner C. Thomas Wright, who has restored six other historic buildings. His partner, Virginia Van Steenberg, spent the day clutching her St. Jude's medal (at least *somebody* was nervous). They plan to spend \$4 million renovating the hotel at its new site and turning it into a 38-room, New Orleans-style luxury hotel.

But that is some tricky moments down the road. The hotel still had to cross the bridge—specially reinforced with steel tubing to accommodate the load—over the San Antonio River, then be spun 90 degrees and backed onto its new site—a reinforced concrete foundation.

The foundation's front wall is nearly three feet longer than its rear wall.

"That's just the way the hotel was built," renovation architect Mike McGlone said. "They were shooting for a

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